

The Desert

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VOL. I.

THE HORRORS OF OAKENDALE ABBEY.

A ROMANCE.

(Continued from No. 10.)

On recovering she found herself laid on a coarse bed, with an old woman standing by her, whose looks testified satisfaction when she opened her eyes. As soon as she could speak, she inquired "if she was still in Oakendale abbey?"

"No," said the woman; "you are in my cottage, and I have been fearfully frightened lest you were dead."

"Thank God," said Laura, "I am once more with a human being; and pray tell me by what, or whose means I came here?"

"Lawkaday!" said the woman; "I know no more than you do; Christian charity made me take you in, when two men brought you here to be recovered. They assured me you was not dead, and would be better in a short time; I was loth to trust them, and now I'm afraid I shall get into trouble; for I think you be the same Lady that has lived so long with the spirits in the abbey."

"Whatever I am," said Laura, "I entreat you to tell me how far I am from that hateful abbey, and if there is a road leads to it from the little wood?"

"Aye, sure there is," said the woman, "and it is hard by. Laws! I don't wonder you have been almost frightened to death, if you have been in that shocking place; why, nobody before ever ventured to stay there."

Laura felt herself extremely weak, and begged the woman to give her some water. She brought her other refreshments; and, after she was a little revived, her thanks were most devoutly and abundantly offered to Providence, not only for her preservation from danger, but also for enabling her to preserve her senses under circumstances so truly frightful, and sufficiently calculated to deprive her of them. She enjoined secrecy to the woman on the subject of her having been in the abbey, as well as, as of her having been now under her roof. She felt her mind more easy on

the woman's assuring her, she herself should be afraid to have it known that she was there, because my lord was a powerful rich man; and yet she should never forgive herself to be the cause of sending a fellow-creature to the abbey, which was not fit for christian folks to live in.

The morning was now far advanced, and Laura thought it would be best to wait the return of the evening before she again attempted her escape. She likewise found herself too much enfeebled, and too low, from the sufferings of her spirits, to begin another enterprise till they were, in some degree, recruited; she therefore composed herself, as well as her situation would admit of, till the evening; although she by no means thought herself safe so near the abbey, and nothing but her inability would have prevented her from quitting the cottage immediately. In the evening she found herself tolerably refreshed, and her desire to escape, aiding her resolution, she rewarded the old woman; at the same time entreating her to be secret, and, with amazing fortitude (considering what she had suffered) set forward on her second expedition.

She saw the abbey at a small distance on her left; and she was determined to take such a direction, as to steer clear of again encountering so frightful an abode.

Behold her then once more endeavouring to gain an asylum from tyrannic power and supernatural terror. Truth and innocence guided her steps, and conscious virtue shielded her from cowardice. The rays of the evening sun, shone upon her beauty, and she followed the first path to her right, which led her along a fine valley. The air revived her spirits; she walked very fast, without seeing either village or house of any sort. The evening began to close in, and every moment seemed to thicken the atmosphere. She feared she should be obliged to some tree or hedge to shelter her from the approaching dews of the night; yet she did not repent her enterprise; on the contrary, she was thankful that fortune had thus favoured her escape, and that she was in a country where she had nothing to fear from wild beasts, and she could meet with nothing more terrific than she had

encountered the preceding night. With reflections like these she continued her walk, and casting her eyes round to find some spreading tree, or sheltering bush, under which to rest, she spied a few scattered cottages almost concealed under the side of a hill; her speed redoubled, and she soon found herself within sight of the Hamlet. A girl, about twelve years old, dressed in a coarse blue woollen jacket, without either shoes or stockings, who walked at some distance before her, and a parcel of geese, which came stretching their necks and hissing at her, were the only objects she saw.

The girl turned into a cottage, and Laura courageously followed her; an elderly woman sat near the chimney carding some wool, and the cottage, though clean, had every appearance of extreme poverty. The woman started at the appearance of Laura, whose dress and deportment were superior to what she was generally accustomed to see; and throwing aside her work, and dropping a courteously, she asked her "if she was come from the Grove, and what she was pleased to want."

Laura, with a sweetness peculiar to herself, replied, "that she wanted nothing but shelter for the night; and if she would have the goodness to allow her to sit in that room till the next morning dawned, she would in no way incommode her."

"Lawkaday!" said the woman, "you might sleep with our Mary-Ann for the matter o' that; but if so be, as you have lost your friends, or missed your way, you'd better go up to the Grove; ould Madam has a power of money, and is main good to strangers. When John comes home from work he'll go and shew you the way."

Laura thanked her, but said, "she had rather stay where she was, at least for this night, and perhaps she might get them to shew her the way to the Grove in the morning."

During this time Mary-Ann had given the alarm to the little republic, and several ragged children were gathered round the door. The good woman soon dispersed them, and telling her daughter to bring in some fire-wood, she set about

making a cheerful blaze, which gave her cottage such an appearance of comfort, as a more splendid apartment seldom exhibits :

"The cricket chirrup in the hearth ;
"The crackling faggot fires."

Laura felt herself pleased, and safe, which brightened every object before her ; and she was contemplating the simplicity of the whole, when a rough-looking, hard-featured man, who was the owner of the cottage, made his appearance. His wife said to him, "Master, here is a gentlewoman comed to stay all night with us ; but I'd fain persuade her to go up to Madams."

John stared at Laura, but said nothing ; when she ventured to ask him, how far they were from Oakendale ?

"Nine miles," said John ; "and I would no go there at this time o'night for all you could give me."

"Nor I neither," thought Laura to herself, surprised that she had walked so far.

"No," said the wife ; "that is a fearful place by all account ; such frightful sights ha been seen there, as makes a body shake but to think on ; and bloody murders ha been committed there formerly no doubt !"

If Laura was satisfied and pleased with her host and hostess, they were not less so with her gentle manners and obliging behaviour ; and entertained no suspicion to the disadvantage of their guest, whom they pressed to partake of the best they had to produce ; and she joyfully shared the coarse, but clean, bed of Mary-Ann.

The next morning, not knowing where to bend her course, and thinking she should be more secure from Lord Oakendale's search, should he be disposed to make any after her, under some safe protection, she listened to the advice of the cottagers, and begged they would conduct her to the Grove, where resided the good Lady of whom they had spoken so highly, and whose name was Greville. The Grove was situated about a mile from the cottage, and the towers of an ancient structure peeped from between the lofty elms and oaks that encompassed its structure, and gave it its name.

As they approached the mansion, Laura ruminated on the mode of introducing herself to the Lady of the house, and could devise no better than by declaring the truth, and entreating her protection, which from the cottager's reports, she was encouraged to hope would not be denied to her.

When they arrived at the house they were received by the house-keeper, a comely looking woman, about fifty years of

age, dressed in a plain old fashioned style, with a large bunch of keys by her side. When Laura requested to be introduced to Mrs. Greville, the house-keeper asked who she was to name ?

Laura blushed, and a tear started into her eyes upon the recollection that she knew no name to which she had any just claim ; and, with a sigh returned, "I have been taught to believe that the name of Unfortunate will introduce me to your lady, and secure me a favourable reception."

The housekeeper, glancing an eye of pity on her, led the way, and introduced her to Mrs. Greville, a venerable old lady, who, taking off her spectacles, politely said, "I have not the honor of knowing you, young lady ; but that, I dare say, is owing to the defect of my sight and memory."

"Alas ! no," replied Laura ; but here her forlorn situation recurring to her mind too forcibly to be suppressed, she again burst into tears. Perhaps this was the best introduction she could have chosen, as a passport to the tender heart of Mrs. Greville. She looked at Laura with the eyes of pity, and taking her by the hand, said, in the kindest accents, "Sit down, young lady and compose yourself ; you seem fatigued, and shall take some refreshment before you gratify a curiosity, which is I own, strongly excited, and be assured, prejudiced in your favour."

Saying this, she dismissed the house-keeper for some chocolate ; and, in the meantime, Laura so far recovered herself as to say, "Dear Madam, you see before you a forlorn creature thrown upon the world, without country, friends, or fortune, to protect me ; not even a relation from whom I can claim either name or affinity !"

"Then," said Mrs. Greville, "surely you are the more entitled to the protection of strangers."

Laura thanked her by the most grateful acknowledgements ; and, having drank her chocolate, began the following history of herself :

"My infant remembrance," said she, "furnishes me with ideas of a country different from this. A gentleman, caressing me, in scarlet clothes, with a sash and gorget, and other glittering appendages, dazzled my young sight, and made an impression on my memory like a distant dream. I can recollect a beautiful woman snatching me to her arms when the gentleman was gone ; and, as she kissed me, the tears fell from her eyes in drops upon my forehead. I remember too that I was called Laura.

The next circumstance that dwelt upon my recollection, was that of sitting upon the lap of a black woman, who told me I should see my papa and mamma no more ; that I must be very good, and she would love me. She taught me my prayers, and the meaning of words ; but she omitted to tell me my name. She treated me with great tenderness, and I conceived an affection for her. Soon after she put me on board a ship with several people of my own colour ; and, after hugging and embracing me with great affection, she left me. I cried after her as the only being of whom I had any knowledge, and I could not easily be reconciled to any other. The motion of the vessel first made me sick, and then lulled me to sleep. When I awoke I cried again ; but was soothed by some women on board, and told that I was going to see my relations. I soon grew accustomed to the ship, and to the people about me, although I was too young to understand any of their conversation, or know whither we were going. As far as my early age, and distance of time, would allow me to judge, we were some months at sea ; when one morning I was frightened by a confused noise, which was followed by a continued firing of cannon. The whole ship's crew seemed in alarm, and I was huddled with the rest of the women, into a dark part of the vessel, which I had never seen before. Every one seemed terrified, and I felt the contagion of fear, though I knew not what we had to dread. In a short time a number of men, who spoke in a different language to that I had been used to, and were almost without clothes, rushed into the place where we were confined and began to drag the women about, in whose screams and cries I joined ; all appeared in confusion, when two or three better dressed men came, and, speaking in a commanding tone, there seemed to be more regulation observed ; but they did not trouble themselves with me, except to shut me in with the rest.

"Previous to this ceremony, and upon hearing a shout, in what I afterwards knew to be the French language, one of the women took a sealed packet from a trunk, which she said belonged to me, and with a string fastened it round my body, telling me, for I shall remember her words, that was the only testimony of my name and parentage ; adding, that I must never let any body take it from me. Her intention was no doubt good ; but she would no doubt have done better to have taught me my name, and so impressed it on my memory, that I might not now have been the destitute and forlorn creature I

feel myself ; but I was then too young to observe the omission.

"Soon after this we arrived, as I supposed, at our destined port, where we were dragged out of the vessel, and put into waggons ; when, after a tedious journey of several days, during which I suffered cold and hunger to the extreme, we were at length brought to a large city, which I heard was Paris. If I was before wretched, though at that time I felt the sensation without knowing by what name to describe it, how much was my misery increased when we were all crammed into a French prison !

"On my first being taken out of the waggon, a tall frightful man, with a wide mouth, held me in his arms, and made a motion as if he would eat me ! I was terrified, and cried ; but no cries were regarded, and we were hurried into the prison, which contained some hundreds of wretches like ourselves. My clothes and linen were of a finer texture than those of my companions ; I was therefore, regardless of my cries, stripped, and clad in a very coarse and filthy garb. I held the paper, which was tied round me, fast with my little hands ; but I was brutally forced to relinquish my hold, and it was wantonly torn from me. After this I remembered nothing for many days ; I turned my head this way, and that way, to avoid the stench of the prison ; but could in no direction find a wholesome air. When I recovered, from what I suppose was a fever and delirium, I found myself stretched upon a wretched bed with several others, and some of the dead bodies were removing to their last abode. I understood none of the language, and my first wish was for fresh air. As I was lying in this miserable condition, a gentleman entered the room, whose countenance and appearance was different from any I had seen before. He felt the pulse of some of them, and spoke the language I understood. I wished to attract his notice, and my eyes followed his countenance whithersoever it turned. At last he approached the bed on which I was laid, and, coming to the side of it, examined my features with attention.

"I longed to speak to him ; but I had scarce strength, and still less courage to make such an effort ; but when he took my burning emaciated hand in his I ventured to clasp his fingers whilst the tears streamed from my eyes.

"He tenderly returned the pressure, saying, 'poor child, to whom dost thou belong ? and what is thy name ?'

"I faintly answered, Laura ; and I am very sick. He gave me something which

he poured out of a bottle, and which seemed of a reviving quality ; and when the person, who attended the room three or four times a day, and locked us up, came in, he conferred with him several minutes in the French language, frequently pointing to me as he spoke.

"The next morning an old woman, whom I had before seen busy about the bodies of those that died in the room, came and took me from the bed, washed me, and put upon me some coarse but clean linen, led me out into the air, and gave me some better refreshment than I had lately tasted. I was then put into a coach in which sat the gentleman I had seen the day before. He spoke to me in the kindest accents, and I endeavoured to shew my gratitude by a thousand childish endeavours.

"When the coach stopped, I was led by my benefactor into a handsome room, where sat a lady of a most benign countenance ; 'This my dear, said the gentleman, leading me to her, is the poor child of whom I spoke yesterday, and whom you have so kindly consented to receive ; she has been very ill, and is weak at present ; but I am sure she has a grateful heart.'

"I paid my respects to the lady in the best manner I was able ; and she said, 'Poor thing, she shall be taken care of ; and I think she looks like a Gentleman's child.' I felt my heart glow with pleasure at this observation ; and I will confess, that it gave me more delight than all the caresses they bestowed.

"In a few days I was still better habited ; and I told my benefactors, whose names were Du Frene, all that I knew and could remember of my history. They had no children, and they conceived a parental regard for me, which I returned by the most filial affection. They were French ; but he was of English extraction, and both were Protestants. He had resided many years in Paris, where he practised surgery, and had been in high repute in that profession, and which he now followed from motives of humanity rather than from lucrative ones, as he was in very good circumstances.

"My dear Madame Du Frene was the only mother I had ever known. She grew every day more fond of me. She had me taught every necessary accomplishment, as well as every useful employment ; and the principles of Religion and virtue, which she practised in their fullest extent, she instilled into my mind as the brightest ornaments I could possess.—Indeed, they appeared with such lustre, from her bright example, that I wanted no incitements to

be at least an humble imitator of her many virtues. Were I to dwell upon all her excellencies, my story would not soon come to a conclusion. Nor had Monfr. Du Frene less merit ; I know not which of them shewed me most fondness ; and when I grew up, their tender care of me, as a child, was changed into unremitting anxiety and solicitude. When I was addressed by the appellation of Mademoiselle Du Frene, their eyes sparkled with pleasure ; and this was often the case, for I knew no other name ; and after all the inquiries M. Du Frene could make, concerning the parcel which was fastened to my breast on my entrance into the prison, no discovery could possibly be made relating to it ; for which reason it was natural to suppose that it contained something valuable—besides the identity of my birth and name, which alone we should have no difficulty in recovering.—Whenever I expressed uneasiness at the circumstances of not knowing to whom I owed my being, with what enraptured fondness would these dear parents call me their adopted child, and assure me that I should never feel the want of such endearing ties ! I hope I returned their affection by the most filial love and duty ; but youth is giddy, and we never know the value of a blessing till it is no longer in our power to set a just estimate upon it. Ten years endeared me to this kind protection, upon which I look back with delight. I learned to speak the language fluently, though English was as much spoken in M. Du Frene's family as French. No expence was spared on my education, dress, or amusement, and I moved in a circle far above the sphere of life in which M. Du Frene was placed ; but it was their pride to have me introduced, and see me caressed by people of rank ; and M. Du Frene was well received by these persons on account of his extraordinary merit.

"It was in the midst of these happy days, when M. Du Frene received letters from his brother in England, who was in the same profession, apprising him of the arrival of a young gentleman, of the name of Rayneer, who was sent to be under his care, in order to be made a proficient in the language, and to complete his education.

"I was in the habit of hearing fine things from the beaux who fluttered round me in public places, and sometimes distinguished a man of good sense and good breeding from the empty coxcomb and the licentious rake ; but none had made an impression beyond the moment in which they addressed me, and my heart

had never as yet palpitated in favor of one man more than another; but the time was now approaching when I could no longer make this boast. Eugene Rayneer arrived; his figure, his voice, his manner, all were captivating in the extreme. He did not live under the same roof with me; but he had lodgings near us, and there were but few hours out of the twenty-four in which we were not together. Ah! how dangerous it is to throw into each other's company two young people nearly of an age, and between whose dispositions a similarity of sentiments cannot fail to form attachment!—What pleasant hours did we pass together! But I will not, dear Madam, tire you with a repetition of our love, the remembrance of which is painful because it is past. Suffice it to say, that we exchanged mutual vows without considering the improbability there was of our ever being united. He seemed to know but little of his family, and still less of his fortune: but nature had been abundantly lavish of her favours, and his own endeavours had not been wanting to render him a most accomplished young man. His temper was generous and good, but rather inclined to be impetuous. My dear M. Du Frene used frequently to lament that he had not sufficient authority over him to keep him from errors occasioned by this disposition.

"One day that we were at dinner M. Du Frene was suddenly, and with an air of mystery, called out. He instantly obeyed the summons, and did not return for some time. I knew not what passed in the mind of Madame; but my own heart foreboded a thousand fearful images during an hour's absence of M. Du Frene. At his return we both expressed curiosity at the face of anxiety with which he appeared: and, after a few moment's silence, he said, 'That foolish boy, Eugene, has engaged in a disagreeable adventure, and has got an ugly wound in the re-entre.'

"At the mention of a wound I felt my blood rush into my face, and a violent beating of my heart succeeded. He went on by saying, 'He hoped there was no danger in the wound; but he understood it was the consequence of a challenge given by Eugene to a person of consequence, who was likewise wounded, and whose friends he feared would not easily be appeased.' What terror did these words convey to my already oppressed mind! Several days passed in this cruel uncertainty. Madame Du Frene frequently visited Eugene; but she always returned with a melancholy countenance, and

I had scarce ever courage to ask her any questions."

"One day she returned with cheerful looks, and mine caught the pleasing sympathy. She put out her hand to me, and said, 'My dear Laura, I can now congratulate you on the complete recovery of Eugene. At the same time I will inform you, that you have been the cause of a wound which had nearly been fatal.'

"How, my dear Madame," I replied, "can I have been the cause of such an accident? and, if I have, how ought I to rejoice that the danger is over?"

"Sit down, my love," said Madame; "be composed, and I will tell you the whole. Eugene was playing at billiards with the young marquis of —, only son of the Duke de St. —. They had played several games, and the marquis, having been successful, was very desirous that Eugene should win some of the games back again; but Eugene wanted to be with you, he grew impatient, and uttering some hasty words, the marquis replied, 'Oh! you want to be with that little Bourgeoise, the surgeon's daughter; ah! she is a tempting little creature; but she may wait till our games are more evenly decided.'

"Eugene heard no more. He instantly gave the challenge, and they as instantly ran each other through the body. Both fell at the same moment, and would have both died from loss of blood, had not one of the waiters fortunately discovered them. It would be impossible to say which of their wounds was most dangerous. The symptoms of the marquis were most favourable, because his mind was not so agitated as Eugene's; nevertheless they were both extremely dangerous, and the Duke of — would have shewn no favour to his son's antagonist had he lost him. Thank God they are now in a fair way of recovery, and both have exchanged forgiveness; and till this favourable event, M. Du Frene and myself have preserved a strange and unpleasant silence towards you; but, unless we could give you more favourable accounts, we were determined to keep you in ignorance. But now, that every thing is in so prosperous a train, we would have you partake in the general joy.

"I thanked my dear Madame, by the most grateful acknowledgements, for all her kindness; and my heart overflowed with praise and thanksgiving for my Eugene's recovery. I longed to see him, but I had not courage to make the request.

Madame Du Frene anticipated my wishes, and said, "There can, I think, be no impropriety in your going with me to see Eugene; I know the sight of you will complete his cure."

"I wanted no intreaty to pay a visit in which my heart was so much interested; and I had the pleasure of finding Eugene perfectly well, except weakness. To me he never looked or spoke in a more captivating manner. In a few days he walked out; our interviews were more frequent than ever, and I foolishly thought that all misfortune was comprehended in the illness of Eugene; and now, that he was well and again restored to me, I had nothing but happiness before me. Alas! how little do we know how fortune varies her favours, and dispenses a chequered scene to most mortals.—I could not divest myself of extreme partiality for Eugene, and found a pleasure in his company, which I had never experienced from the frivolity of a Frenchman; and when the most sensible remarks, and the tenderest attentions, were received from a man whose external appearance bespoke the nobler qualities of his mind, my heart gave the truest testimony to his merits; nor did I affect to disown them to my dear Madame Du Frene; to her I had confided all my grief, and all my joy. She would allow me to expatiate on the merits of my beloved Eugene with all the glow of affection which warmed my breast; she loved me too tenderly to check the fond effusions which afforded me so much delight; and when I fancied that I was possessed of his affections, nothing I thought, could interrupt my happiness, or reverse my fortune:—She would only insinuate, in the gentlest accents, and with the most persuasive arguments, that I must not expect complete happiness; that all our lives were liable to the caprice of fortune, and whose changes human nature was born to encounter, and must submit.—Perfect bliss was the lot of none nor was even a large portion of happiness possessed by many; she would therefore wish to prepare my mind, and make it equal to meet the dispensations of all human events, that so I might secure that peace, which the world can neither give nor take away.

"Thus was I, by her dear precepts, in some degree fitted for those many difficulties and dangers I have already encountered; and to her, next to God Almighty, I am indebted for this fortitude which has hitherto sustained me." But to return to my story.

(To be continued in No. 12.)